

Putting the lessons of Scotia to work

Acting on what was learned in weeks of investigation and public hearings into the Scotia Coal Mine disasters, MESA has embarked on a wide-ranging series of changes in coal mine enforcement and training programs.

In announcing the changes, MESA Administrator Robert E. Barrett said that "it's become obvious that improvement must be made, both within MESA and in terms of new regulations and legislation to

strengthen the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969." Barrett served as chairman of a special fact-finding panel, appointed by Interior Secretary Thomas S. Kleppe. The panel completed its first round of hearings into the two Scotia explosions on April 30.

Barrett said some problems disclosed at the hearings may take time to correct. However, he immediately ordered:



An aerial overview of the Scotia mining complex. An arrow points to the opening of the mine where explosions killed 26 men in mid-March.

- Frequent blitz inspections at underground coal mines. In such visits a "flying squad" of inspectors are dispatched throughout a mine to make sure the entire mine—not just one section—is inspected simultaneously. Barrett said this is specially important with respect to ventilation checks. By using a number of inspectors, MESA can ensure that air from one portion of a mine is not diverted to another which is less well ventilated, while air checks are being made.

- More detailed and careful reviews by MESA of ventilation and miner training plans submitted by coal operators to MESA's district offices. Also, training plans will be closely examined by MESA enforcement personnel to make sure they are in fact being carried out to the letter by operators.

- A hard push for the speedy promulgation of mandatory federal training and education standards for coal mine personnel. The standards would include mandatory training of all new miners, additional training each time a miner changes from one job to another in the mine, and periodic retraining to retain job status and certification.

- Full implementation of a "mine profile rating system," now in its pilot stage, to better pinpoint mining operations for enforcement and training efforts. As well as relying on accident injury experience, the system would take into account the management of health and safety programs at each mine.

- Expansion of an on-going accident prevention program in which experienced MESA personnel assist operators in identifying and correcting health and safety deficiencies. MESA will move through a mine offering assistance, on-the-spot training, and accident prevention advice as required. Basically, accident prevention programs will be tailored to the needs of a particular mine and individual miners.

- Better use of computers to speed up the assessment of civil penalties against companies that violate federal health and safety standards. Faster assessment and collection of fines are among the ways to make civil penalties more of a deterrent to violations of the law.

- Beefed-up training of federal inspectors in mine rescue and recovery work.

- Efforts to encourage development of better "self-rescue" devices than the one-hour device now used by miners to filter out carbon monoxide gas, a poisonous by-product of a fire or explosion.



Piecing together the story of the Scotia Disaster—MESA Administrator Robert Barrett, with Kentucky Mining Commissioner Harreld Kirkpatrick, center, and Congressman Tim Lee Carter.

- Drafting of new standards requiring better emergency survival equipment and materials to be made available to underground miners by the operators.

Barrett emphasized that the Scotia investigations are continuing and as more facts are found, further recommendations for change may be forthcoming. "What we learn from this disaster," he said, "will be used to advance the day when mining is as safe as any other occupation a man can choose, and I strongly believe this is an achievable goal."

The Scotia explosions, at the mine near Oven Fork, Ky., on March 9 and 11, took the lives of 26 men, including three federal mine inspectors.

After the second explosion, the mine was sealed by MESA order and no one has been permitted to re-enter until concentrations of methane gas have stabilized at safe levels. At this writing, regular monitoring of methane levels in the mine is continuing.

The exact cause of the explosions has not yet been pinpointed, but investigators hope to learn more when the mine is finally reopened.